

The Historical and Cultural Significance
of the Irish Folklore Commission

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Bianaca Brammer

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Frederick Suppe

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Frederick Suppe".

**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

April 2012

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2012

Abstract

In order to understand and appreciate the cultural history of a population, it is crucial to both study and collect their folklore and traditions. In Ireland, folklore was the major form of history for thousands of years, passed down orally from generation to generation. However, as society began to modernize, old customs were slowly forgotten. In an attempt to preserve the folklore of the Irish people, The Irish Folklore Commission was founded in 1935. With the assistance of James Delargy and Seán O'Sullivan, this vast wealth of information was saved for future scholars and the general public. In this thesis I analyze the major factors that led to the need for a folklore program, the people who made it possible, what the Irish Folklore Commission accomplished, and why folklore is extremely important to Irish cultural heritage.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Frederick Suppe for advising me throughout this project. Through his teaching he inspired me take an interest in the topic of Irish History and because of this interest, I have gained a deep understanding of Irish culture and traditions.

I would like to thank Missy, Alan, A.J., Samantha, Lizzy, and Janet Brammer for always encouraging me to pursue my dreams and giving me the motivation to finish this task.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Beginning Interests in Folklore	5
A Plan is Formed	8
The Irish Folklore Commission (Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann)	13
James Hamilton Delargy (Séamus Ó Duilearga)	17
Seán O'Sullivan (Seán Ó Súilleabháin)	20
Who Did the Collecting	22
How Folklore Was Collected	26
What They Collected	31
The Schools' Scheme of 1937-1938	33
The Role of Women in the Commission	35
Seán O'Sullivan's Cataloguing System	39
The Publishing	41
The Commission Through the Years	43
The Irish Folklore Commission Today	47
Why Ireland and Why Folklore Matters	50
Bibliography	53

Introduction

In order to understand and appreciate the cultural history of a population, it is crucial to both study and collect their folklore and traditions. Folklore is widely considered to be the “traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice” that is passed down primarily through oral stories and examples.¹ Every culture has its own distinct identity, and as a group, they share common folk traditions. These may include: the ideals that people traditionally believe in, what they do on a daily basis, what they know, how they make and build objects, and what they say.² To fully comprehend where a culture has come from and why they developed into the society they represent today, their beliefs and customs must be examined in as close to their original form as possible. In many societies knowledge of the past was passed down orally through the means of folklore, which meant that when stories were no longer told, that rich cultural history was lost forever. In Ireland especially, folklore was the major form of history for thousands of years and as society began to modernize, old customs began to be forgotten.³

¹ “American Folklore Society,” *American Folklore Society*, <http://www.afsnet.org/.html> (accessed 17 Mar. 2012).

² “American Folklore Society.”

³ Alan Dundes, *International Folkloristics: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore*, (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 10.

In the preface to *Beside the Fire* by Douglass Hyde he states:

Ten or fifteen years ago I used to hear a great many stories but I did not understand their value. Now when I go back for them I cannot find them. They have died out and will never again be heard on the hillsides, where they probably existed for a couple of thousand of years; they will never be repeated there again, to use the Irish phrase, 'While green grass grows or water runs'.⁴

Several key groups and people in Ireland saw this process occurring and realized they had to take action to prevent it.⁵ Folklore offers a window to the past, a look back into where beliefs, tales, and customs came from. In a gallant effort to preserve and maintain the traditions and folklore of Ireland for future generations, the Irish Folklore Commission was founded in 1935. The Irish Folklore Commission not only saved the folklore of Ireland, but also gave legitimacy to the study of folktales on a scholarly level, highlighting the importance of cultural traditions and history.⁶

⁴ Brid Mahon, *While Green Grass Grows: Memoirs of a Folklorist*, (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1998), 8.

⁵ Mahon, *While Green Grass Grows*, 9-11.

⁶Dundes, *International Folkloristics*, 10-1.

Beginning Interests in Folklore

The interest in folktales and beliefs began slowly, gaining relatively few supporters over time. Before the Irish Folklore Commission was created, there was no mass movement to collect folktales.⁷ The people were told stories directly from storytellers, or through works published by authors. In the nineteenth century there were a few individual collectors, such as Croftan Croker, Jeremiah Curtin, William Wilde, Speranza Wilde, John Millington Singe, Lady Gregory and the Abbey Theater, W. B. Yeats, and Douglass Hyde who both collected and published works containing folktales. It can be argued that both Yeats and Hyde were the most influential figures when it came to presenting folklore to the masses.⁸ W. B. Yeats published collections of folktales, while Douglass Hyde had the best individual collection of folklore in Ireland. Through Hyde's professional "standing in the nation and his professorship in Irish language and literature at the National University in Dublin, he elevated folklore from a hobby into a respected field of knowledge."⁹ These authors were able to get the word out about folklore and open people up to the idea of reading it, as well as convincing scholars that it was a worthwhile pursuit.¹⁰

⁷ Mahon, *While Green Grass Grows*, 8-9.

⁸ Roisin Walsh, "Ireland Looks at Herself," *ALA Bulletin* 33, no. 11 (1939): 11.

⁹ Sean O'Sullivan, *Folktales of the World—Folktales of Ireland*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966), xxvi.

¹⁰ Sean O'Sullivan, "The Work of the Irish Folklore Commission," *Oral History* 2, no. 2 (1974): 9.

Following the support of folklore by individuals came the Gaelic language movement.¹¹ The constant decline of Irish over the centuries leading up to the development of the Irish Folklore Commission, as well as the government's attempt to restore it to dominance, both played a major role in the urgent desire to safeguard folktales. The Gaelic League was instrumental in maintaining Irish as a spoken language and sustaining Irish as the National Language of Ireland. Through this the League supported the collection of stories in the Irish language and promoted a "cultivation of modern literature in Irish".¹² The League's annual Irish-language cultural festival *An tOireachtas*, which was established in 1897, promoted the collecting of folklore. Prizes were offered for the best tales collected that represented an expression of Irish identity.¹³ However, the primary focus here was on the linguistic aspects of folklore, not the material itself.¹⁴ When the Irish Free State Constitution of 1922 declared that Irish was the official "national language" of Ireland, the Gaelic League felt as though they had won a small victory.¹⁵ The main legacy of the Gaelic League was their desire to collect and defend oral tradition. They procured thousands of manuscripts in the Irish language, which contained both literary and oral tradition.

¹¹ "Maire MacNeill (1904-1987)," *Clare County Library*, http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/people/maire_macneill.htm (accessed 16 Mar. 2012).

¹² Micheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*, (Helsinki: The Finnish Literature Society, 2008), 39.

¹³ Máire MacNeill, "Irish Folklore as a Source for Research," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 2, no. 3 (1965): 340.

¹⁴ Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission*, 73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

By 1928 the lifestyle of the Irish people was undergoing a period of rapid change. As modernity took over, traditional customs and ideals were being forgotten at an unprecedented rate following the aftermath of World War I. The entire Irish culture and language was in serious jeopardy of being lost forever. James Hamilton Delargy was one of the few people who saw this crisis unfolding and knew that he had to do something to stop it. He wrote, "the tradition of Ireland is behind those hills and we've got to rescue it before it's trampled into the dirt...because it was a jewel of great price and one had to see that it was given a refuge and an appreciation by the Irish people."¹⁶ Delargy had the inspiration, background, and training that made him the perfect person to step up to the challenge of reviving the folklore of Ireland. It can be argued that if the Irish language had not been experiencing such a rapid decline, the systematic collecting of folklore would have never been conducted on the grand scale that it was. Delargy was inspired to save Ireland's culture and because of this a plan was formed.¹⁷

¹⁶ Crístoíir Mac Cárthaigh, *Treasures of the National Folklore Collection*, (Dublin: University College, Dublin, 2010), 9.

¹⁷ Bo Almqvist, "The Irish Folklore Commission Achievement and Legacy," *Folklore Studies Pamphlets* 3, (Dublin, 1979), 9.

A Plan is Formed

Professor Carl William von Sydow and Professor Reider Christiansen were two of the early twentieth century's most influential figures in the study of folklore. Von Sydow was a professor at the University of Lund and Christiansen was a professor at Oslo University.¹⁸ Having both revolutionized the study and collection of folklore in Sweden, they sought out other European countries to bestow their knowledge upon. They firmly believed that Ireland held a wealth of cultural information that needed to be maintained for future generations. With their primary visit to Ireland they sought out someone who could face the challenge of organizing and collecting the folklore of Ireland.¹⁹ They soon met Delargy, who was already interested in Irish folklore, and were able to establish the Folklore of Ireland Society (An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann) in 1927.²⁰ This marked the beginning of the first organized effort to collect and study the folktales and oral traditions of Ireland.

The Society's board consisted of Pádraig Ó Siochfhrada, President; Douglas Hyde, Treasurer; Fionáan Mac Coluim, Assistant Treasurer; and James Delargy, Editor and Librarian.²¹ Delargy edited the Society's journal *Béaloideas*

¹⁸ Georges D. Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 385.

¹⁹ Ibid., 385-6.

²⁰ O'Sullivan, "The Work of the Irish Folklore Commission," 10.

²¹ Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission*, 77.

and funds from its subscriptions were used to support the program.²² In the first issue, Delargy made an appeal to the people of Ireland and their pride, while stating the primary objectives of the Society: "The aim of our Society, is a humble one—to collect what still remains of the folklore of our country. We are certain that the nonsensical rubbish which passes for Irish folklore, both in Ireland and outside, is not representative of the folklore of our people."²³ He also outlined the guidelines for oral collection in six points: "the importance of giving the reciter's name and age together with details of the provenance of the reciter's material, the necessity of recording material verbatim, retaining all peculiarities of dialect, and making no corrections [to speech]."²⁴ The Society truly believed that the folklore of Ireland must be saved in its true form, so that it could be conserved for the people of Ireland and the rest of the world. It was understood that the establishment of a program devoted only to the task of collecting and preserving folklore was crucial.

Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha also believed that it was the duty of the Irish Folklore Society to not only preserve the material they collected, but distribute it to the public in an easy and accessible way. He said, "We will not be Irish again until the best of that is in common possession among the people as a foundation for culture and as colouring and an echo in our literature and in those matters

²² Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), ix.

²³ Bo Almqvist, Breandán Mac Aodha, and Gearóid Mac Eoin, *Hereditas: Essays and Studies Presented to Professor Séamus Ó Duilearga*, (Dublin: The Folklore of Ireland Society, 1975), 3.

²⁴ Almqvist, Mac Aodha, and Mac Eoin, *Hereditas*, 3-4.

that demonstrate and make one person a Spaniard and another a Russian.”²⁵ This was one of the primary reasons why the Society’s journal was published; however, all of the material they collected was also made available to the public if they wished to view it. The Irish Folklore Society paved the way for the Irish Folklore Commission, establishing how a program such as this would run and be maintained.²⁶

In 1930, the government established The Irish Folklore Institute (Institiúid Béaloideas Éireann) and with the help of a small grant, an organized system of collecting was carried out.²⁷ The Board of the Institute chose Douglas Hyde as the President, Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha as the Treasurer, and James Delargy as the Director and “Chief Editor” of the Institute’s future publication.²⁸ During the initial stages of collection, the work was further made possible by a grant from the Rockefeller Institute in America, as well as a small reference library made possible by the Carnegie Trust.²⁹ Unfortunately, due to an overall lack of money and resources, the Institute could not focus on collecting.³⁰ The government never gave the Institute their full support, instead focusing on other issues going on within Ireland at the time. The work of the Institute was not put to waste

²⁵ Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission*, 77.

²⁶ Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller*, 385.

²⁷ O’Sullivan, “The Work of the IFC,” 10.

²⁸ Briody, *The IFC*, 97.

²⁹ MacNeill, “Irish Folklore as a Source for Research,” 341.

³⁰ Briody, *The IFC*, 98.

though.³¹ Delargy and others, who had an extreme passion for folklore, used the failures of the Irish Folklore Institute as a model of a program that could not work.³² Delargy did not want a folklore program that would be short-lived and unable to do the collecting required; he wanted an institution that would produce an undying legacy.³³ He was determined that a permanent program was required to collect the folklore of Ireland, something that the Institute could never do.³⁴

In March 1932 Delargy approached the new Minister of Education, Tomás Ó Deirg, hoping that he would be more sympathetic to his desire to improve the way folklore was collected. Ó Deirg was an avid supporter of the revival of the Irish language and was more willing to help because of this. After a two-year period of working out the logistics of the Commission, an outline sanctioned by the Department of Finance was created in 1934.³⁵ Delargy wanted the program to be placed within the University College, Dublin, but this was rejected. Those in charge of the Commission's creation wanted to keep it separate from the College, thus giving the government more control over it. The Department of Finance proposed a board of fifteen members who would be nominated by the government and representatives of the Royal Irish academy, the Folklore of Ireland Society, the Department of Finance, and the Department of Education. It

³¹ Seán Ó Súilleabháin, "Research Opportunities in the Irish Folklore Commission," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 7, no. 2/3 (1970): 116.

³² MacNeill, "Source for Research," 340.

³³ Briody, *The IFC*, 105.

³⁴ Ó Súilleabháin, "Research Opportunities," 117.

³⁵ Briody, *The IFC*, 115-22.

was agreed that Delargy would become the Honorary Director of the Commission, but because he did not get along with the Department of Finance plans kept getting pushed back and stalled.³⁶ Once the Department of Finance passed the program over to the Department of Education, which was more receptive to the idea, they submitted a final proposal for the establishment of the Irish Folklore Commission.

After years of working with the government and persuading them that an everlasting folklore program was required, Delargy finally got his way. In April 1935, the Irish government created the Irish Folklore Commission (Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann).³⁷ The initial government grant provided by President Eamon de Valera gave the Commission one hundred pounds for each of the thirty-two counties. The government's primary motive in supporting the systematic collecting of folklore throughout Ireland was to protect the "cultural traditions of the nation in the dwindling national tongue."³⁸ President de Valera appreciated the fact that through the compilation of folklore, Ireland's national heritage could be upheld. He saw that the work of the Irish Folklore Commission supported his political agenda and promoted the resurgence of the Irish language. He had a vision for the future of Ireland, one that was completely separate from England, and the Irish Folklore Commission could help make this possible.

³⁶ Ibid., 122-3.

³⁷ Niall Ó Ciosáin, "Approaching a Folklore Archive: The Irish Folklore Commission and the Memory of the Great Famine," *Folklore* 115, no. 2 (2004): 222.

³⁸ Dundes, *Folktales Matters*, xxvii.

The Irish Folklore Commission (Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann)

The Irish Folklore Commission was designed to have three stages in the process of the collection of folklore. The first was “the propaganda stage” which included the arousing of enthusiasm for the work. The second was “the collecting stage” and the third was “the exploitation of the materials collected stage”.³⁹ Once the Commission was set up and ready to go, they were done with the first stage and moving onto the second. Everyone understood that their primary concern was the immediate gathering of folklore; those directly involved with its work were already enthusiastic and up to the task. Every day that they spent not collecting folklore was another day wasted. The folklore of Ireland had to be compiled so that it could be studied and remembered. The Commission’s second goal was to focus on cataloguing and publishing the material recorded; however, due to the large amount of material coming in they were not able to organize it all. This was not considered to be detrimental, because it was believed that future scholars would have the time to do the cataloguing, sorting, and publishing.⁴⁰ The leaders of the Irish Folklore Commission knew that they had to focus their time and efforts on collecting the material currently available to them, which was rapidly disappearing from memory at an alarming rate.⁴¹

³⁹ Briody, *The IFC*, 133.

⁴⁰ MacNeill, “Source for Research,” 341.

⁴¹ Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller*, 386.

The Irish Folklore Commission was originally housed in three small rooms in University College, where they stayed for fifteen years.⁴² It was financed by a grant-in-aid provided by the government; however, they were never given the amount required to do the enormous job that they were tasked with.⁴³ A board of nineteen members was originally delegated to lead the Commission. Peadar Mac Fhionnlaoich served as chairman and James Delargy was appointed as the Director.⁴⁴ Once financial issues were sorted out, they soon hired Maire McNeill and Sean O'Sullivan, who would help with the daily tasks the Commission would face. They were able to slowly acquire a staff of full-time collectors by the autumn of 1935.⁴⁵ They appointed many full-time collectors, who were all paid salaries. Along with the full-time collections, there would be as many as eighty part-time collectors at one time. O'Sullivan stated that the part-time collectors were people whom they had gotten to know in both the English and Irish speaking areas of Ireland.⁴⁶ They would "do their ordinary day's work at whatever they were employed to do, and then in their spare time or on their holidays, they would send us in copybooks of local lore, under our instructions and we would pay them so much, . . . for the work they did."⁴⁷ Collections of tales, especially those

⁴² Ó Súilleabháin, "Research Opportunities," 117.

⁴³ Sean O'Sullivan, "The Work of the Irish Folklore Commission," *Oral History* 2, no. 2 (1974): 10.

⁴⁴ Briody, *The IFC*, 130.

⁴⁵ O'Sullivan, *Folktales of the World*, xxxiii.

⁴⁶ Almqvist, Mac Aodha, and Mac Eoin, *Hereditas*, 5-7.

⁴⁷ O'Sullivan, "The Work of the IFC," 11.

included in the folk songs and special collections, were often collected by these part-time collectors, or given to the Commission through private donations.⁴⁸

At the Commission's second meeting they appointed a Finance Sub-Committee under the recommendation of de Valera.⁴⁹ He stated that it "should consist henceforth of a small Executive Committee and Council, the functions of the latter to be mainly advisory."⁵⁰ Liam Price, Séamus Ó Casaide, Lughaidh Muidhir, and León Ó Broin were all selected to represent the sub-committee. Along with this committee, as part of the plan that created the Commission, the Irish Folklore Institute was abolished on March 29th, 1935.⁵¹ With the presence of the Commission it was no longer necessary, especially since it had never obtained its original goals.⁵² With the Institute's closure, the Department of Finance proposed that they donate their papers, library, and other collections to the Commission.⁵³ In this way, the Irish Folklore Commission gained a source of reference and a head start in collecting.⁵⁴ Without this they would have been forced to start from scratch, which would have taken time that they did not have. At the beginning of the Folklore Commission, no one could have known that what

⁴⁸ Séamus Ó Catháin, "The Irish Folklore Archive," *History Workshop* 31 (1991): 146.

⁴⁹ Briody, *The IFC*, 120-9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵¹ Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller*, 386-8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵³ Mac Cárthaigh, *Treasures of the National Folklore Collection*, 11.

⁵⁴ Briody, *The IFC*, 132.

was originally planned as a five year program, would end up lasting for thirty-five years.⁵⁵ The Irish Folklore Commission exceeded even Delargy's expectations and by the end of its run, it was truly a success. The Minister of Education, Tomás Ó Deirg stated that the setting up of the Commission was:

...a public act of homage to our own people, the fulfillment of a filial duty towards the unknown Irish dead. It was a mighty monument to the poor nameless country people who have preserved the stories of the joys and sorrows of Ireland, who had passed on to us the whisperings of the centuries during which our country lay under the blanket of the dark.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Almqvist, Mac Aodha, and Mac Eoin, *Hereditas*, 3-4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 132-3.

James Hamilton Delargy (Séamus Ó Duilearga)

James Hamilton Delargy (Séamus Ó Duilearga) was born in Ireland in 1899. In 1907, his family moved from Northern Ireland to settle in the south, where he attended Castelknock College near Dublin. Delargy became extremely fascinated with the Irish language, earning a M. A. in Celtic Studies under the direction of Douglas Hyde in 1923.⁵⁷ While finishing his degree, he had the opportunity to meet the man who would change his outlook on the field of folklore and inspire him to collect and preserve it. Seán Ó Conaill was a farmer-fisherman who lived in County Kerry, only spoke Irish, and soon became one of Delargy's key informants.⁵⁸ Delargy would go to visit him three nights a week when he was staying in the area, as he was always eager to hear more tales. He reported that in the entire time that he knew Ó Conaill, not once did he ever repeat a story. He had an unlimited source of knowledge and would often go on for hours telling a single narrative. Upon Delargy's last trip to collect the tales of Ó Conaill he was told:

I suppose you will bring out a book of these stories some day. I've told you now all the tales I can remember, and I'm glad that they have been written. I hope they'll shorten the night for those who read them or hear them being read, and let them not forget me in their prayers, nor the old people from whom I myself learned them.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Dundes, *Folkloristics*, 154.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 154-5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

In 1926, Delargy became the editor of the Folklore of Ireland Society's journal, *Béalóideas*, which he went on to edit until 1973. It was in the first issue of this journal, which was published in 1927, that he laid out his own personal goals for the Society and their collection of folklore.¹ He wanted a folklore program that would inspire the people of Ireland, as well as maintain these ancient tales and traditions. In that same year, Delargy was introduced to Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, who was one of the leading advocates of the study and collection of folklore in Sweden. In 1928, Delargy went to Sweden to learn more about the study of folklore from him and other folklorists.² When the Irish Folklore Commission was set up in 1935, Delargy stated that it was largely due to the efforts of von Sydow. He said that he had gone directly to President de Valera and persuaded him that the Irish government should invest in the collection and preservation of folklore.³ This event marked one of the rare times that the Irish government financed folklore research.⁴

Delargy was made the honorary director of the Irish Folklore Commission, soon employing Seán O'Sullivan and Kevin O'Danaher. In 1946, Delargy was given a professorship at University College, Dublin. Unfortunately, he felt that most of his time should be spent with the Commission and did not devote a great deal of time to teaching. It was because of this that many scholars thought the

¹ Ibid., 154.

² Ibid., 154-5.

³ Mac Cárthaigh, *Traditions*, 9.

⁴ Dundes, *Folkloristics*, 154.

the study of folklore in universities was lacking for so long a time.⁶⁴ When Delargy finally retired, Swedish folklorist Bo Almqvist replaced him. In 1971, when the Irish Folklore Commission was transformed into the Department of Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin, a doctoral program was created, which Delargy largely supported.⁶⁵ Delargy was single-handedly responsible for the creation of the Irish Folklore Commission. Without his utter dedication to the subject and constant efforts to maintain its government support, it would have never accomplished all that it did.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid., 156.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁶ Almqvist, Mac Aodha, and Mac Eoin, *Hereditas*, 3-4.

Seán O'Sullivan (Seán Ó Súilleabháin)

Seán O'Sullivan was born in the town of Doire an Locha in 1903.⁶⁷ Originally a primary school teacher in Waterford, County Kerry, he developed a passion for folklore and oral poetry that led him to James Delargy.⁶⁸ Delargy sent Seán O'Sullivan to the Dialect and Folklore Archive at the University of Uppsala in Sweden for three month's training. Here he learned their system of organization and cataloguing, which would prove vital in the structuring of the Irish Folklore Commission.⁶⁹ When he returned to Ireland he began cataloguing the thousands of pages of folklore that had already been collected from all over Ireland, taking over the position as archivist for the Irish Folklore Commission.⁷⁰ He was one of the few members of the Commission who stayed with it through its entirety, starting in 1935 and not retiring until 1974, after it had been transferred to the Department of Irish Folklore.⁷¹ O'Sullivan published *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* in 1937. The work was intended to be a guide for collectors of folklore; however, it was also used as a definition of Irish folklore and folklife.⁷² O'Sullivan then went on to write, *The Types of the Irish Folktale* with Reidar Christianen, which was a compilation of Irish tale types.

⁶⁷ Lysaght, "Seán Ó Súilleabháin," 137.

⁶⁸ O'Sullivan, *Folktales of the World*, xxx.

⁶⁹ O'Sullivan, "The Work of the IFC," 10.

⁷⁰ Dundes, *Folkloristics*, 154.

⁷¹ Lysaght, "Seán Ó Súilleabháin," 137.

⁷² Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, 6.

In 1945, he was elected as a member of the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin. He also served as a member of the Cultural Relations Committee, on the Placenames Commission, Radio Éireann Council, the Honorary Council of the Folklore Society (London), and a patron of The Folklore of Ireland Society. O'Sullivan helped to review and develop the theoretical directions of folklore studies in Germany, Scandinavia, Finland, Russia, Italy, Spain, and England. He frequently discussed the relationship between folklore and other disciplines, emphasizing how they could benefit one another.⁷³ His interests included Irish calendar custom, material culture, folk custom and belief, and Irish mortuary customs.⁷⁴ It can be said that while James Delargy was the inspiration for the Irish Folklore Commission, O'Sullivan was the brains behind the operation. It is without a doubt that the Commission would have never flourished without his superior assistance and innovative genius in the field of folklore.⁷⁵

⁷³ Lysaght, "Seán Ó Súilleabháin," 142.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 142-3.

⁷⁵ Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller*, 386-7.

Who did the Collecting

The Irish Folklore Commission employed twenty-one full-time collectors throughout its duration.⁷⁶ Some of these people included Tadhg Ó Murchú, who lived in Waterville, County Kerry and collected most of his material there. Michael J. Murphy liked to call himself a “cultural intelligence officer” instead of a collector. Murphy had a popular broadcast for the BBC in Belfast and had written books on the folklore of the northeast. From 1949 to 1983 he covered the Rathlin Islands, Antrim Glens, Mourne, Fermanagh, Tyrone, and Armagh.⁷⁷ Jim Delaney was recruited by the Irish Folklore Commission to become a full-time collector of oral literature and popular traditions. His primary area of focus was centered on the various islands surrounding Ireland and the English-speaking midlands. He spent thirty-two years of his life collecting folklore and left behind over 20,000 pages of manuscript material and hundreds of hours of sound recordings.⁷⁸ Through his work he “provided a great service to those sometimes unsung parts of Ireland by demonstrating the existence there of rich veins of tradition and remarkable continuity of custom and usage.”⁷⁹ He recorded tales, legends, work practices, crafts, skills, and other aspects of material culture. He

⁷⁶ Mac Cárthaigh, *Treasures*, 115.

⁷⁷ Mahon, *While Green Grass Grows*, 90.

⁷⁸ Mac Cárthaigh, *Treasures*, 116.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

also constantly worked with the Folklife Division of the National Museum of Ireland, helping them catalogue ethnography and culture.⁸⁰

In the beginning years of the Commission the collectors were limited to those people “whose competence [was] beyond doubt”.⁸¹ The Irish Folklore Commission did not want to employ anyone who had no training, or experience and who they could not rely on.⁸² Delargy proposed recruiting full-time collectors from postgraduate students of Universities, “young men of sufficient education who have shown an aptitude for this work”, “Irish teachers employed by the Branch of Technical Instruction under the Department of Education”, and Primary and Secondary teachers.⁸³ Because no university college in Ireland offered courses in folklore at that time, there were no students with professional qualifications. The Commission decided that a broad understanding of Irish was essential for the work collectors would be conducting. This would make them not only able to understand the stories being told to them, but storytellers across Ireland would be more willing to open up to them.⁸⁴ The Commission did not advertise that they were looking for collectors; instead several people applied who had a previous interest in folklore.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁸¹ Briody, *The IFC*, 229.

⁸² Mac Cárthaigh, *Treasures*, 9.

⁸³ Briody, *The IFC*, 230.

⁸⁴ Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller*, 386.

⁸⁵ Briody, *The IFC*, 231.

Collectors were usually appointed to a three-month probationary period before they would be hired full-time.⁸⁶ Six collectors were hired during the first year of the Commission, including Liam Mac Coisdeala, Tadhg Ó Murchadha, Seán Ó hEochaidh, Proinnsias de Búrca, Liam Mac Meanman, and Nioclás Breatnach.⁸⁷ These collectors were under the instruction of Delargy and:

...given a thorough course of instruction in Dublin by the Director. This course [would] cover the nature and extent of the oral material to be collected, and [would] stress its importance culturally, nationally and linguistically, and [would] include instruction on the *modus operandi* based on the Director's practical experience of over ten years as a field worker in many parts of Ireland, and his knowledge of the methods employed in Scandinavia and in Germany by institutions directly financed by the State. This course [would] last at least three weeks.⁸⁸

However, most of the collectors were only trained for a week before they were set loose into the field. In the end it depended on how much experience each individual collector had, as some of them had already done collecting work throughout Ireland. The collectors were instructed to "record *verbatim* the words of the storytellers, and subsequently go over any obscure words or passages with the narrator." They were also told to "record all dialectical nuances, by adapting the traditional orthography of Irish to this purpose."⁸⁹ Many collectors often complained about the drudgery of transcription; however, they understood why it was a vital component of their work. Those collectors who stayed with the Irish Folklore Commission were an extremely dedicated group of men. They most

⁸⁶ Mac Cárthaigh, *Traditions*, 116.

⁸⁷ Briody, *The IFC*, 232.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

definitely did not do it because of the little money they got paid, but because they loved the work they were doing.⁹⁰ They realized the importance of the collection of Irish folklore and were proud to be a part of the process.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Ibid., 235-9.

⁹¹ Mac Cárthaigh, *Treasures*, 11.

How Folklore was Collected

Whenever Delargy decided to open up a new district of Ireland for the collectors of the Irish Folklore Commission to work in, he would first personally go to the area and look around. He would see as much of the area as possible by foot, talking to people along the way and learning about their particular customs. He would become acquainted with the storytellers who lived there and then send his collectors to them to gather stories.⁹² One or more full-time collectors were sent to the area that the folklore would be collected from. O'Sullivan stated, "We did not look for university graduates—we looked for some teachers who had been trained but who had not yet got jobs. We looked for people who knew the Irish language."⁹³ After each collector had finished their period of training they would be assigned a district.⁹⁴ Over time, the Commission began to focus on English, as well as Irish speaking areas; however, in the beginning their primary focus was obtaining tales in Irish. "We have concentrated our collecting since we began in the Irish-speaking districts, because our language is now in a parlous condition, and in the Irish speaking areas the traditions were richest of all, phenomenally rich."⁹⁵ It is also worthwhile to note that due to the government's political ambitions, they would have not initially supported the collecting of folklore in English. They had allowed the Irish Folklore Commission to exist to

⁹² Dundes, *International Folklorists*, 169.

⁹³ O'Sullivan, "The Work of the IFC," 10.

⁹⁴ O'Sullivan, *Folktales of the World*, xxxiv.

⁹⁵ O'Sullivan, "The Work of the IFC," 10-1.

preserve the national heritage of Ireland, with an emphasis on their Celtic origins, not their forced English legacy.⁹⁶

The measure of the Commission's success was based on its ability to "evaluate ordinary people as the principal characters in the narration of Irish culture."⁹⁷ This depended on a level of mutual trust and understanding between collectors and storytellers. Delargy believed that the Commission was so successful because of this close relationship to the people from whom they were collecting tales. He stressed that it should be noted, "that the contact the Irish Folklore Commission has with the rural population is closer than is the case with any other cultural institute of its type in the country."⁹⁸ Over time the collectors working for the Commission became such a constant presence in the lives of many rural Irish families, that their visits were seen as a normal part of the day.⁹⁹ O'Sullivan stated that the folklorist had, "become an institution like the priest and the postman, and receiv[ed] a friendly welcome and often a high tea when he [came]."¹⁰⁰ This not only provided the collector and the storyteller with friendly meetings, but also gave the storyteller a sense of value in the work that he was doing. The storyteller was able to finally feel like his work was appreciated by not only the folk of Ireland, but also the national government. Many collectors later

⁹⁶ Briody, *The IFC*, 54.

⁹⁷ Mac Cárthaigh, *Treasures*, 127.

⁹⁸ Briody, *The IFC*, 21.

⁹⁹ Almquist, "The IFC Achievement and Legacy," 7.

¹⁰⁰ O'Sullivan, *Folktales of the World*, xxix.

reported that they were never turned away from a single home that they had gone to in order to collect stories. They were either invited in and told a tale on the spot, or told where they could go to find one.¹⁰¹

Most of the material transcribed by full-time collectors consisted of verbatim transcripts of field recordings, which were made on Ediphone machines in the early years and tape-recorders later on.¹⁰² A wax cylinder was attached to a revolving shaft on each Ediphone machine. Above this cylinder was a needle, which would move from left to right as the shaft and cylinder revolved. The speaker would talk into a horn-shaped tube and the collector would then listen to the recording by placing the tube up to his ear. The machine was extremely difficult to transport and would fill up quickly. Only 800 to 900 words would fit on each cylinder, depending on the speed in which the storyteller spoke. Collector Seosamh Ó Dálaigh said that having to change the cylinder interrupted the “continuity of the tale and forced the collector to remember where the narrator stopped, as he or she, depending on his or her age or alertness, might not necessarily remember.”¹⁰³ While the Ediphone machine may have been a hassle to use, it was better than nothing, and with the advent of tape-recorders their job became increasingly easier.

Once the folktale was recorded, the collectors would then transcribe the material into notebooks. After each tale was collected and transcribed, the

¹⁰¹ Almqvist, “Achievement and Legacy,” 7.

¹⁰² Ó Catháin, “The Irish Folklore Archive,” 146.

¹⁰³ Briody, *The IFC*, 244.

material was sent back to Dublin where it was processed. The Commission suggested that, "long tales and sustained pieces of narrative *seanchas* [were] best suited for Ediphone recording; shorter items in prose and verse [would] be more easily written from direct narration."¹⁰⁴ Once the information was sent back to Dublin the transcripts of the tales were checked against the recording and any corrections that needed to be made were done. The wax cylinders used in the Ediphone machines could then be used over and over again, resulting in many of them being erased and sent back into the field.¹⁰⁵ Because of a lack of funding, not all of the field recordings could be kept in the beginning stages of the Commission. Another important feature of collection were the daily journals kept by the full-time collectors. These had "detailed descriptions of their field work, accounts of individual informants including storytellers, as well as of their style and repertoire."¹⁰⁶ Notes were taken in pencil and the notebooks of each collector were bound in chronological order in successive volumes. This same procedure was also followed for the notebooks of part-time collectors.¹⁰⁷

Due to the amount of time that transcribing and collecting in the field would take, many other forms of collection were used. The primary alternative to field collecting was the questionnaire. Delargy had been introduced to the Swedish questionnaire system back in 1928 and believed that it would be an

¹⁰⁴ O'Sullivan, *Folktales of the World*, xxxiv.

¹⁰⁵ O'Sullivan, "The Work of the IFC," 10.

¹⁰⁶ O'Sullivan, *Folktales of the World*, xxxiv.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxv.

effective way to collect vast quantities of folklore. In November 1939, the Commission issued a short questionnaire on the Feast of St. Martin. This survey went out to twenty-six of the thirty-two counties and of the 727 sent, 419 were returned.¹⁰⁸ This questionnaire provided important information on the origins of the Feast of St. Martin and people's continued beliefs about the festival. In order to conduct questionnaires, a pool of correspondents had to be maintained that would guarantee responses. The Commission also used two types of questionnaires: general and local. General questionnaires were sent to correspondents all over Ireland and often "varied considerably in their length and breadth of enquiry."¹⁰⁹ Local questionnaires were more specific and were "sent only to a limited number of respondents, or to people living in a particular area."¹¹⁰ Each questionnaire was issued in Irish and English, to promote more responses. Overall, the Irish Folklore Commission collected over 40,000 pages worth of material from questionnaires.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Briody, *The IFC*, 281-2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 286.

What they Collected

Collectors were sent all over Ireland to gather the traditional stories of folklore.¹¹² They made their scope of collections as wide as possible in an attempt to preserve a picture of the conditions in Ireland during recent centuries, as was reflected in oral tradition. Some tales collected included those of the Ulster heroes (Conor Mac Neasa, Conall Cearnach, and others), tales of Fianna, hero-tales, religious tales, romantic stories, humorous stories and anecdotes, legends, and more.¹¹³ Another example of what the Commission collected was the significant custom of *Buailidheacht*. This detailed the removal of cattle to the hill pastures during the summer months, a practice essential to Irish life.¹¹⁴ Most of the tales they collected were stories that had been passed down orally for centuries.¹¹⁵ However, many storytellers had also added tales from manuscripts to their repertoires. This had increasingly been done in more recent generations as the art of storytelling began to die off.¹¹⁶

In 1945, the Commission conducted a countrywide survey over the Great Famine of the 1840s.¹¹⁷ The Commission's survey of the oral history of the Irish Potato Famine, entitled "The Famine of 1845-47", was a way of commemorating

¹¹² Read, "Some Characteristics of Irish Folklore," 259.

¹¹³ O'Sullivan, *Folktales of the World*, xxxvi.

¹¹⁴ MacNeill, "Irish Folklore as a Source of Research," 345.

¹¹⁵ Read, "Some Characteristics of Irish Folklore," 258.

¹¹⁶ MacNeill, "Irish Folklore as a Source of Research," 344.

¹¹⁷ Ó Ciosáin, "Approaching a Folklore Archive," 222.

the loss of over one million Irish people.¹¹⁸ This short questionnaire was circulated among the population by full-time and part-time collectors to gain a better understanding of how the average person dealt with the Famine, as well as what the “collective memory” of it was. The questionnaire received a larger response than any questionnaire issued before or since. Over 500 people from all over Ireland sent in accounts of what they remembered from tales passed down through their families.¹¹⁹ Through this, an image of the Famine as viewed by the peasant class was formed.¹²⁰ The folklore collected was then compared to documentary sources and historical records. By combining these sources a more accurate view of the Great Famine was obtained, providing insight and closure to millions of Irish people.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 222-3.

¹¹⁹ Mahon, *While Green Grass Grows*, 163.

¹²⁰ Ó Ciosáin, “Approaching a Folklore Archive,” 223.

¹²¹ Ibid., 224.

The Schools' Scheme of 1937-1938

The Schools' Scheme of 1937-1938 was conducted in Ireland using Primary schoolchildren between the ages of eleven and fourteen.¹²² With the help of the Department of Education, the Irish Folklore Commission initiated this program in an effort to more thoroughly collect the folklore of Ireland.¹²³ Seán Ó Sullivan and James Delargy were once again the main men responsible for this plan. It was stated that they convinced the government to approve of the plan and they were the ones who executed the publicity for the scheme, "explaining it and re-explaining it to the teachers of the country what was meant by folklore—and how to collect folklore—on Radio Éireann, in the newspapers, and in countless meetings of teachers and trade-unionists throughout the length and breadth of the country."¹²⁴

The Scheme was carried out in twenty-six of the thirty-two counties in Ireland. All schoolchildren who took place in the initiative were required to record "traditional lore of local interest—the names of fields, forts, rivers, as well as old tales and poems."¹²⁵ The booklet of instructions that was sent out to schools spoke of how the collection of oral traditions in Ireland was a work of extreme national importance. The work had to be carried out and they were intrusting this

¹²² Mac Cárthaigh, *Treasures*, 136.

¹²³ Ó Ciosáin, "Approaching a Folklore Archive," 222.

¹²⁴ Briody, *The IFC*, 261.

¹²⁵ Walsh, "Ireland Looks at Herself," 9.

task to the future leaders of Ireland.¹²⁶ Over twenty-three tons of notebooks containing folklore were collected from the schools, resulting in extremely valuable figures that would have otherwise gone uncollected. O'Sullivan organized the data collected, including "lore about the festivals, lore about the ancient crafts in the district, the games they play, local songs, proverbs, riddles and so on."¹²⁷ The Schools' Scheme not only saved this folklore, but also allowed people to realize how imperative the recording of folklore is. Never before had they truly understood just how much information there was out there. The Schools' Scheme could have gone on for years and it would have still not gathered every folktale available.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Briody, *The IFC*, 261.

¹²⁷ O'Sullivan, "The Work of the IFC," 12.

¹²⁸ Walsh, "Ireland Looks at Herself," 9.

The Role of Women in the Commission

The Irish Folklore Commission did not employ any full-time female collectors. This was largely due to the restrictions placed on women regarding employment at the time the Commission was created, as well as the attitude towards women who worked outside of the home.¹²⁹ Women who worked full time were often looked down upon, especially in Ireland's predominantly Catholic society. The marriage ban placed on women meant that even if a woman had a job in the Commission, she would have been forced to give it up upon marriage, like Máire MacNeill did.¹³⁰ Due to the amount of time that it took to train full-time collectors, there could have been no way to guarantee that a woman would not get married before she could have proven useful to the Commission in regards to collecting. There were also the practical issues of a woman traveling alone through the countryside. Collectors would often travel at all hours of the night, going to remote places, and many times meeting with men who lived alone.¹³¹ This patriarchal view of women also explains why there were very few women informants, with the notable exception of Peig Sayers.¹³² Storytelling was often seen as something men did, while women took care of the home and the children. Statistics show that only one in every six informants was a woman.¹³³

¹²⁹ Briody, *The IFC*, 58.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 461.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 462.

¹³² MacNeill, "Irish Folklore as a Source for Research," 341.

¹³³ Briody, *The IFC*, 465.

No women were ever appointed to the Irish Folklore Commission's Board, or given real leadership roles. Delargy and his male colleagues did not believe that they needed a female perspective added to the mix. He even went as far as to criticize the women who worked for him when they had multiple jobs, like Brid Mahon who worked at the Commission cataloguing and collecting folklore on a small-scale.

Máire MacNeill was a folklorist and writer who was born in Portmarnock, County Dublin in 1904. Her father was the Minister of Education from 1922 to 1925 as a part of the Irish Free State government. He was a founding member of the Gaelic League and encouraged her to take an active interest in folklore and research. Máire MacNeill graduated from University College, Dublin in 1925 and then went on to work as a secretary, journalist, and sub-editor of the Irish Folklore Commission.¹³⁴ She published many articles, papers, and books on the subject of Irish folklore while she worked for the Commission and after she left.¹³⁵ MacNeill was forced to leave the Commission in 1949 when she married and moved to America. She was a vital part of establishing the Irish Folklore Commission; however, because of the marriage ban she was unable to pursue her career in Ireland.¹³⁶

Peig Sayers and Brid Mahon both provide an interesting look into the Irish Folklore Commission's history, one that cannot be gained from a male

¹³⁴ "Maire MacNeill (1904-1987)."

¹³⁵ Almqvist, "The IFC Achievement and Legacy," 14.

¹³⁶ "Maire MacNeill (1904-1987)."

perspective. It is vital to note that many sources of folklore were missed out on because of this limited view of whom folklore could be collected from and who could do the collecting. Peig Sayers was born in 1873 in the Dingle Peninsula of County Kenny. She lived most of her life with her husband on Great Blasket Island until her death in 1958. In total, over 375 narratives and 45 long wonder tales were recorded from her. Collector Seósamh Ó Dalaigh described her as, “the great artist and wise woman that she was, Peig would at once switch from gravity to gaiety, for she was a lighthearted woman, and her changes of mood and face were like the changes of running water.”¹³⁷ He described her motions as she told stories saying that, “As she talked her hands would be working too; a little clap of the palms to cap a phrase, a flash of the thumb over her shoulder to mark a mystery, a hand hushed to mouth for mischief or whispered secrecy.”¹³⁸ The Commission collected tales from other women, but none who were as greatly respected as Peig.

Brid Mahon worked for the Commission both cataloguing and collecting folklore. She also took minutes at board meetings, prepared the books for audit, and wrote the annual report for the Departments of Education and Finance.¹³⁹ Because she was a woman she was not given full freedom over where she could collect and was mostly limited to the office.¹⁴⁰ Her biggest complaints were with

¹³⁷ O’Sullivan, *Folktales of the World*, xxvii-iii.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, xxviii.

¹³⁹ Mahon, *While Green Grass Grows*, 183.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

the Commissions' limited funds and Delargy's overbearing presence. She said, "Delargy continuously objected to my radio work", as well as her journalism. He wanted to have full control over his staff, even when it came to their lives outside of the Commission.¹⁴¹ While the job was challenging and frustrating at times, she believed that it was worth the end result. Brid Mahon stated that, "Over a period of 36 years and with the help of a dedicated team of workers, [Delargy] succeeded in gathering together the largest and most important body of folklore in Western Europe."¹⁴² She understood the significance of the work she was doing and refused to give it up. Without the help of dedicated workers like Brid and storytellers like Peig, the full story of Irish cultural history could have never been recorded.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 189.

¹⁴² Ibid., 12.

Seán O'Sullivan's Cataloguing System

As the Commission's archivist, Seán O'Sullivan was responsible for implementing the complex system of cataloguing that kept track of the Commission's records.¹⁴³ He stressed that you had to have cataloguing and indexing done no matter what the size of the collection, because otherwise material would be lost. The Commission originally used a card index containing the names and address of anyone who had ever contributed to it. They could be full-time collectors, part-time collectors, or people who had only answered a single questionnaire.¹⁴⁴ By the end of the Irish Folklore Commission, this list had soared to an enormous 2,800 names. Each card contained the name and address of the person, along with the volumes and pages that they had contributed. They also used an alphabetical card index containing over 45,000 informants, defined as the people in the countryside who had given material to the collectors.¹⁴⁵ Following this a catalogue of the districts was done. O'Sullivan believed this was essential so that if someone from a particular district wanted to know what material had been collected from their area, all that would need to be done was to look it up in the catalogue.¹⁴⁶ Finally, the main catalogue was the subject index, which O'Sullivan based on his training at Uppsala University in

¹⁴³ Patricia Lysaght, "Seán Ó Súilleabháin (1903-1996) and the Irish Folklore Commission," *Western Folklore* 57, no. 2/3 (1998): 137.

¹⁴⁴ Ó Súilleabháin, "Research Opportunities," 119-20.

¹⁴⁵ O'Sullivan, "The Work of the IFC," 12.

¹⁴⁶ Ó Súilleabháin, "Research Opportunities," 119-20.

Sweden.¹⁴⁷ Unfortunately, due to the lack of sufficient time and funding only a quarter of the Commission's large collection of folklore was put into the card-reference system.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ O'Sullivan, "The Work of the IFC," 13.

¹⁴⁸ Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller*, 386.

The Publishing

Due to the amount of material collected, the Commission was simply unable to publish everything.¹⁴⁹ Every year they would publish as much data as possible and the rest of the records would then be made available to the public.¹⁵⁰ Because their primary focus was on collecting, they were not overly concerned that they could not publish all of their material. They understood that future scholars would be able to take on this task for them. Some of the works that were published under the Irish Folklore Commission included *An Seabhac*, *An Seanchaidhe Muimhneach*, *Eamonn O Tuathail*, Reidar Christansen's *Studies in Irish and Scandinavian Folktales*, and Maire MacNeill's *The Festival of Lughnasa*.¹⁵¹ Some of the manuscripts published by the Irish Folklore Commission included information on Irish emigration to America, the lives of "Tinkers" or Travelers, select transcripts of Irish folk music, and local information about the Great Famine.¹⁵² These scholarly works published by the Irish Folklore Commission helped to legitimize the study and collection of folklore. They drew in international attention, as well as the interest of the Irish people. People all over the world were learning about the folklore of Ireland and it was sparking an

¹⁴⁹ Walsh, "Ireland Looks at Herself," 9.

¹⁵⁰ Ó Súilleabháin, "Research Opportunities," 121.

¹⁵¹ Almqvist, "The IFC Achievement and Legacy," 14.

¹⁵² "National Folklore Collection at University College, Dublin," *University College Dublin*, <http://www.ucd.ie/irishfolklore/en/> (accessed 20 Mar. 2012).

interest in some of them to do research themselves.¹⁵³ Today, a selection of these published materials can be found on the website of University College, Dublin devoted to the National Folklore Collection.

¹⁵³ Ó Súilleabháin, "Research Opportunities," 121.

The Commission Through the Years

Because the Irish Folklore Commission was originally intended to only last for five years, Delargy was faced with the task of constantly trying to extend its cut-off date. It had become increasingly clear that the folklore of Ireland could never be collected in such a short amount of time. Due to the constant fear of termination, the staff was in a never-ending state of flux.¹⁵⁴ They did not know if their jobs were going to be there for them next year, let alone in many years to come. When the Commission's five years were almost at an end, Delargy officially requested to the Government that its time be extended. He wrote to the Secretary of the Government:

The establishment of the Commission in 1935 was hailed by the learned bodies of Europe and the United States with enthusiasm and approval, and the interest of the Irish Government in preserving the native traditions and folklore was appreciated in many quarters where interest in Irish affairs had up till then not been in evidence...At present the archive of the Commission is recognized as being the most extensive and most important in existence, while it is still conceded by European research that the Commission's work is of necessity in its initial stages only. My personal opinion is that the national folklore archives should become a permanent institution and take its place with Government folklore archives of a similar character in many other countries.¹⁵⁵

Delargy was determined to keep the Commission running and in the following spring the Government gave the Commission another four years so that it could complete the mission it was originally assigned.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller*, 385.

¹⁵⁵ Briody, *The IFC*, 137-9.

¹⁵⁶ Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller*, 385-6.

During this time, World War II had broken out in Europe, causing many officials in the government to question the further expenses that would be used on the Commission. The Department of Finance once again came into conflict with Delargy, stating that, "while we may not agree as to the utility of the work being done or as to its value the fact remains that many people regard the work of the Commission as of first class importance and consider that the work of the collection should be pushed ahead."¹⁵⁷ De Valera agreed to cut back on the funds of the Commission, but it had become too much of an integral part of Irish national heritage to abandon it. The next challenge that the Commission faced was where they would permanently house their collection. It had been increasing in size and many people felt that it needed to be protected from damage. Countless debates were held over the prospect of housing it in University College Dublin, which was rejected again and again for various reasons.¹⁵⁸ In the end they were once again forced to wait for a final decision.

In July 1943, Delargy once again sent a request that the Commission's term be extended and in fact, made permanent. He emphasized the high esteem in which the Commission was held both abroad and throughout Ireland. He said, "it was imperative to continue this work not only for the benefit of Ireland but for the benefit of the Europe that would emerge after the war."¹⁵⁹ The Department of Education was unsure of whether any more collecting truly needed to be done.

¹⁵⁷ Briody, *The IFC*, 137-8.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 144-9.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 150-1.

Because they were not out there with the collectors, they did not realize what a vast wealth of folklore Ireland contained. It was proposed that the Commission would be given one or two more years to complete the collection, further making those at the Commission feel the pressure of an impending deadline.¹⁶⁰ Finally, on June 7th, 1947, Delargy was able to meet with de Valera and work out a plan. De Valera agreed to make the Irish Folklore Commission permanent, as well as house the staff and collections in a building on Merrion Square in Dublin.¹⁶¹ Unfortunately, due to political setbacks, de Valera went back on his word. It was not until 1949 that the Commission would be given a home at 82 St. Stephen's Green, provided by UCD, and their grant was doubled.¹⁶² With this permanent residence and extra money Delargy wrote:

For years, due to the lack of money and staff, we have had to make do with a small number of full-time and part-time collectors. Now that we have an adequate residence of our own and been provided with a proper grant, which is a source of great encouragement to us, we would like to endeavor to recover the remnants of folklore and national tradition in the Irish-speaking parts of Connacht and the English-speaking parts of Leinster and Ulster.¹⁶³

The fifties were a period of time when the Irish Folklore Commission was able to expand and collect the folktales of further areas of Ireland. They had originally focused on areas rich with Irish influence, where the English language

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 152-8.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 164-7.

¹⁶² "National Folklore Collection at University College, Dublin."

¹⁶³ Briody, *The IFC*, 176.

and history had not corrupted traditional beliefs.¹⁶⁴ With their added grant, it was possible to collect tales in English and thereby learn how recent history had changed storytelling. The Commission continued to face challenges with both the Departments of Finance and Education, but tried to be optimistic.¹⁶⁵ The sixties were a time of downsizing for the Commission. Many of the original members were quite old by this time and many of them had passed away. In the late sixties, there was a change in government and leadership throughout Ireland. Times started to improve for the Commission and in March 1968, the Government approved their transfer to University College, Dublin.¹⁶⁶ The staff of the Commission was apprehensive of what this move would mean for their future and the future collection of folklore. They believed that they still had a lot of work to do and if they were placed in a University setting, they might be forced to focus on academics instead of devoting their time to collecting.¹⁶⁷ They were permanently moved to UCD in April of 1971, with both happiness and trepidation. While efforts to publish folklore were maintained and small-scale collecting was carried out, it would never again be the same as it had been when the Commission was in the height of its collecting.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller*, 386.

¹⁶⁵ Briody, *The IFC*, 177.

¹⁶⁶ "National Folklore Collection at University College, Dublin."

¹⁶⁷ Briody, *The IFC*, 209.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

The Irish Folklore Commission Today

The Department of Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin replaced the Irish Folklore Commission in 1971.¹⁶⁹ The Department taught Irish Folklore at the undergraduate and graduate levels and attempted to continue the work of the Commission, although not in as great detail. Michael Tierney, the former President of the College, officially opened the new Department of Irish Folklore with a speech talking about his first encounter with James Delargy. He stated:

I have always believed that the right place ultimately for the staff and archives of the Commission is within a university, where continuity and independence can be more readily assured than anywhere else. Difficulties of time and circumstance have made such an arrangement impossible until now, when the work of collection has come fairly near completion, and what is needed most is rather scientific arrangement, comparative study and the exploration of the many possibilities which this great collection provides for the Irish scholar, and, indeed, for scholars of all nationalities who are interested in the history and character of the Irish people.¹⁷⁰

While the collecting was largely put aside once the Commission was transferred to UCD, it did not completely stop. From 1979 to 1980 the Department of Irish Folklore carried out the Urban Folklore Project in Dublin and the surrounding areas.¹⁷¹ Fifteen university graduates, including five who had graduated from the Department of Irish Folklore, conducted the Urban Folklore Project. They collected an enormous amount and variety of oral tradition.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ "National Folklore Collection at University College, Dublin."

¹⁷⁰ Briody, *The IFC*, 219-20.

¹⁷¹ Ó Catháin, "The Irish Folklore Archive," 147.

¹⁷² "National Folklore Collection at University College, Dublin."

Small teams recorded Dublin's lore, memories, ways of life, and tales.¹⁷³

Because of efforts like these, new tales of folklore were not being totally neglected. It is easy to forget that folklore is a never-ending process, but UCD has tried to remember this fact. Along with projects like these, the Department has continued to publish its materials, allowing the public access to the rich cultural material that folklore provides.

As of the early 1990's, the archives of the Department of Irish Folklore included two manuscript series—the Main Manuscripts that include 2,238 bound volumes containing over one million pages and the Schools' Collection that includes over 500,000 pages. There are also sound recordings on gramophone discs and audiotapes, which are comprised of thousands of hours of sound. 40,000 photographs, films, videotapes, plans, sketches, diagrams, and over 40,000 printed books, pamphlets, and periodicals related to folklore are all housed here, as well.¹⁷⁴ Around seventy-five percent of the manuscripts and sound recordings in the Department are in the Irish language, with most of the others in English, Scottish Gaelic, Manx, and Breton. Seán Ó Sullivan's work, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, gives a description and classification system for the materials enclosed here. It also provides a definition for the concept of folklore, stating that it is "not only all aspects of folk narrative tradition, folk customs and beliefs, but also the entire field of material folk culture as well as folk music, song

¹⁷³ Mac Cárthaigh, *Treasures*, 174.

¹⁷⁴ Ó Catháin, "The Irish Folklore Archive," 145.

and dance.”¹⁷⁵ The collections of the Department of Irish Folklore are housed in the Fine Arts Building, Belfield and in Earlsfort Terrace; they are accessible to both scholars and members of the general public for view.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 146.

¹⁷⁶ “National Folklore Collection at University College, Dublin.”

Why Ireland and Why Folklore Matters

Folklore is an important part of any cultural history; however, as it has been previously noted, folklore played a key part in Irish tradition. This is largely due to the fact that Ireland was an oral society for thousands of years. The storyteller, or *seanchas*, was praised and held in the highest regard. Without them society could not function; there would have been no one to pass on tales of heroic warriors and kings, or magical stories of fairies and the Otherworld.¹⁷⁷ James Delargy noted that the lives of the people of Ireland were “on the lips of men and not on the point of a pen scratching on a vellum page.”¹⁷⁸ The Irish storytellers truly stand alone in their knowledge of tradition and ancient lore.¹⁷⁹ It is not difficult to associate them with the metaphor of a library, for in their vast stores of knowledge they hold the information of thousands of books. Folktales are meant to be told orally and listened to by the audience, not read. Each storyteller brings their own creative twist and unique life to the tale they are spinning. When read from a page, it is impossible to feel the tale come to life around you. This is one of the reasons why the Irish Folklore Commission’s use of recording devices was so significant. While not all tales were kept once they were transcribed, those that remain present us with further insight and understanding into the world of the folktale.

¹⁷⁷ Read, “Some Characteristics of Irish Folklore,” 250.

¹⁷⁸ MacNeill, “Irish Folklore as a Source for Research,” 344.

¹⁷⁹ Dundes, *Folkloristics*, 158.

Folklore continued to play a fundamental role in Ireland because it was directly connected to the national and cultural identity of the Irish people. Through folklore it was possible to find “a sense of continuity with those who have gone before, a continuity which can contribute a deeper meaning to one’s present identity.”¹⁸⁰ With the rising growth of nationalism and a desire to define cultural identity, the rise of folkloristics as a discipline grew in Ireland. Folklore and folktales had kept the Irish language alive among both the peasant and rural classes of Ireland. Most tales continued to be told in Irish and this encouraged others to maintain the language, as well as for young children to learn it so they could listen to stories.¹⁸¹ It is clear that the creation of the Irish Folklore Commission came down to the right mixture of history, politics, and time. It is extremely possible that if there had not been a widespread sense of nationalism that resulted from the World Wars and a desire to keep their native language alive, Ireland’s folklore would have gone uncollected.

Scholars increasingly realized that “the folklore of Ireland [was] of special value because Ireland alone of Western European countries remained untouched by Roman influence.”¹⁸² The study and collection of folklore opened up another window to the past and “through it light is thrown on the Celtic peoples of pre-Roman Europe and of pre-Roman Britain where the Roman occupation left few

¹⁸⁰ Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, 10-1.

¹⁸¹ Dundes, *Folkloristics*, 165.

¹⁸² Walsh, “Ireland Looks at Herself,” 10.

traces of the earlier civilizations.”¹⁸³ Máire MacNeill phrased it best when she said, “there can be no question about the importance of Irish folklore to the social historian. It offers information to be found nowhere else about the life of the people.” Folklore not only provides us insight into the far past, but the more recent past as well; “It makes up to some degree for the submergence in the crucial eighteenth century of the natives who are absent from records except as tenants and comic servants of the Ascendancy.”¹⁸⁴ Tales passed down through generations “present such things as the Munster carting of butter to Cork, the coastal trading, the ships sailing to Guernsey and Jamaica, . . . vagabond poets, poor scholars, peddlers, spailpiní, and the traveling people of the roads,” all things which would have been long ago forgotten without folklore.¹⁸⁵ Folklore gives a voice to the people who are often passed over in history, the peasant, the farmer, and the average everyday person who deserves to have their story told. The Irish Folklore Commission provided an opportunity to collect and preserve this priceless information for future generations of scholars, students, and the general public. It saved the long-established history of Ireland and inspired countless people to take pride in their national heritage and attempt to understand the cultural traditions of others.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 10-1.

¹⁸⁴ MacNeill, “Irish Folklore as a Source for Research,” 345.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 345.

Bibliography

Articles

- Lysaght, Patricia. "Seán Ó Súilleabháin (1903-1996) and the Irish Folklore Commission." *Western Folklore* Vol. 57, No. 2/3 (1998): 137-151.
- MacNeill, Máire. "Irish Folklore as a Source for Research." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* Vol. 2, No. 3 (1965): 340-354.
- Ó Catháin, Séamus. "The Irish Folklore Archive." *History Workshop* 31 (1991): 145-148.
- Ó Ciosáin, Niall. "Approaching a Folklore Archive: The Irish Folklore Commission and the Memory of the Great Famine." *Folklore* Vol. 115, No. 2 (2004): 222-232.
- Ó Súilleabháin, Seán. "Research Opportunities in the Irish Folklore Commission." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* Vol. 7, No. 2/3 (1970): 116-125.
- O'Sullivan, Sean. "The Work of the Irish Folklore Commission." *Oral History* Vol. 2, No. 2 (1974): 9-17.
- Read, D. H. Moutray. "Some Characteristics of Irish Folklore." *Folklore* Vol. 27, No. 3 (1916): 250-278.
- Walsh, Roisin. "Ireland Looks at Herself." *ALA Bulletin* Vol. 33, No. 11 (1939): 9-12.

Books

- Almqvist, Bo, Breandán Mac Aodha, and Gearóid Mac Eoin. *Hereditas: Essays and Studies Presented to Professor Séamus Ó Duilearga*. Dublin: The Folklore of Ireland Society, 1975.
- Briody, Mícheál. *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*. Helsinki: The Finnish Literature Society, 2008.
- Dundes, Alan. *Folklore Matters*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989.
- Dundes, Alan. *International Folklorists: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore*. Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999.

Mac Cárthaigh, Crístoír. *Treasures of the National Folklore Collection*. Dublin: University College Dublin, 2010. Under 'traditions'

Mahon, Brid. *While Green Grass Grows: Memoirs of a Folklorist*. Dublin: Mercier Press, 1998.

O'Sullivan, Sean. *Folktales of the World—Folktales of Ireland*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966.

Zimmermann, Georges D. *The Irish Storyteller*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001.

Papers

Almqvist, Bo. "The Irish Folklore Commission Achievement and Legacy." *Folklore Studies Pamphlets* 3, Dublin (1979).

Websites

"American Folklore Society." American Folklore Society, accessed March 17, 2012, <http://www.afsnet.org/>.

"Maire MacNeill (1904-1987)." Clare County Library, accessed March 16, 2012, http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/people/maire_macneill.htm.

"National Folklore Collection at University College, Dublin." University College Dublin, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.ucd.ie/irishfolklore/en/>.